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TRANSCRIPT: Neurodivergent Leaders in the Cultural and Academic Sectors?

Why aren't there female leaders who identify as neuro-divergent in the arts and academia? Who are the gatekeepers? What needs to change?

Leadership neurodiversity risk-taking

The following is the edited transcript of my response to & provocation arising from my film Brisk/Risks. This was part of the event Too Much or Not Enough: Neurodiversity and Cultural Production (http://www.bcmh.bbk.ac.uk/2019/05/10/medical-humanities-at-birkbeck-arts-week-20-24-may-2019/). The event consisted of a film screening and discussion with myself, curator Alessandra Cianetti, and literary researcher Dr Sophie Jones. We explored the aesthetics of neurodiversity and the place of invisible disabilities in the cultural industries. It took place on 21 May 2019 at Birkbeck, University of London. The evening began with an overview (https://www.a-n.co.uk/blogs/transcript-too-much-not-enough-neurodiversity-in-uk-art-academia/) by myself on the contested term 'neurodiversity', followed by the premiere of the film, Brisk/Risks (https://vimeo.com/336958029), which explores risk-taking within and beyond ADHD. This was followed by further responses and provocations by myself, Cianetti and Jones and a discussion. Associated with the event was a 5-day exhibition (http://wesatonamat.weebly.com/2019-may-birkbeck.html) of my #MagicCarpet in Room 106, which was also artist Vanessa Bell's studio. Bell, sister of Virginia Woolf, worked in tapestries too. The exhibition and event were part of Birkbeck Arts Week 2019 (http://www.bbk.ac.uk/annual-events/arts-week/arts-week-2019). The podcast of the evening can be accessed here (https://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2019/05/too-much-not-enough-neurodiversity-and-cultural-production/). This event is funded by a grant from the Birkbeck Wellcome Trust Institutional Strategic Support Fund. Read the transcripts of 2 of the presentations at Brisk/Risks here (https://mind-the-gap.live/2019/06/19/risk-taking-and-adhd/). If you are keen to be part of a HE research network on neurodiversity with a focus on practice (including creative practice), interdisciplinarity and intersectionality, please contact me kai@kaisyngtan.com (mailto:kai@kaisyngtan.com)

The open mic and film touch on several key themes. Firstly, gender and intersectionality. I'll be talking more about these and the importance of what I describe as 'diversifying neurodiversity' in a forthcoming talk at the Science Museum (https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/see-and-do/material-culture-health-activism). English researcher Christina Lee (https://t.co/4LXzEq9xNW) has written powerfully about intersectionality and disability and I will be quoting from her. In the film, we see several women stepping forward to share their stories. Jaye's piece in particular, which you can read about in the appendix, has such a commanding presence. The film also unpacks the word 'production', which is in tonight's title.



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Dr Kai Syng Tan
FRSA SFHEA is an artist whose artistic and curatorial practice, teaching, writing and research straddle within, between and beyond the art and academic worlds. Known for her 'eclectic style and cheeky attitude' (Sydney Morning Herald), 'radical interdisciplinarity' (Dr Alan Latham, UCL), her installation, film, text and performances have appeared at Documenta, Royal Geographical Society, Biennale of Sydney, MOMA, ZKM, ICA and LADA Study Guide. Recognition includes San Francisco International Film Festival Golden Gate Award and Artangle Open 100, and collections include the Museum of London and Fukuoka Art Museum. Since 2014 Kai is known as someone 'instrumental in the UK and lots of other contexts' 'to start to form what might become to be called "Running Studies"' (Professor Gregg Whelan 2015). Of her RUN! RUN! RUN! Biennale, the Guardian urges academics to 'take a leaf out of its book' (2014), and she was heard on BBC Radio 3 on running as an artistic discourse (Free Thinking January 2017). Co-created with disabled colleagues, the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 8th ASEAN Para Games (for which Kai was Visual Director) was applauded by the Singapore Prime Minister as 'spectacular'. Kai completed her PhD at the Slade School of Fine Art as a UCL scholar, and has taught in the practice, history and theory of fine art, media art, film and art education in higher institutions in Australia, Singapore, Tokyo and London. Currently Visiting Researcher and first Artist in Residence at the Social, Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry (SGDP) at King's College London, Kai is working on an Unlimited commission funded by Arts Council

© A-N THE ARTISTS INFORMATION CO (/ABOUT/TERMS-OF-USE/#COPYRIGHT) (HTTPS://WWW.A.N.CO.UK/)		Speakers were from all walks: medics, so-called 'service users', artists. I mis plays out something I call 'productive antagonisms' (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1474474017702511), which is a creative collision of distinct perspectives. The carpet, seen here as a backdrop (and at other times working as a carpet on which you could sit (http://wesatonamat.weebly.com/2018-may-02-nesta.html)), literally opens up a space to facilitate that. Also evident was the 'too much' in the title. The tapestry is, well, busy and over the top. It's a deluge of associations, visual puns, words, wordplay layers upon layers of conflating references. It's the opposite of minimalism: <i>maximalism</i> — it's <i>too much</i> . (http://wesatonamat.weebly.com/tapestry-and-installation.html) But I'll let you on to a secret: my favourite artists are mainly minimalists: Mark Rothko, Samuel Beckett Steve Reich, Peter Kubelka. Such a discussion is intrinsically related to ADHD. We talk about attention <i>deficit</i> , but the 'D' in ADHD could be more accurately captured by 'dysregulation', suggests Philip Asherson in a conversation with me. People with ADHD pay <i>not enough</i> attention to things they don't care about, and <i>too much</i> attention to things they do, which is known as hyper-focus. This discussion is also related to Sophie's criticism of 'productivity', which makes me think of Alison Kafer's 'crip time' (http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3995/3540), which she defines as 'flex time that is not just expanded but exploded' [...] crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds'.	England that explores mind wandering. She is also Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University and UCL Institute of Advanced Studies, as well as Director of RUN! RUN! RUN! International Body for Research and RUN! RUN! RUN! Biennale, and Arts and Humanities Research Council Peer Review College member. RUN! RUN! RUN! Biennale www.kaisyngtan.com/r3fest #MagicCarpet commission: @wesatonamat http://www.wesatonamat.weebly.com
Explore	It begins here!	<div>q</div> <p>But what I'd really like to focus on is something I'm working on, so the following are disparate strands — even more fragmented and unfurmed than usual! I'm thinking about risk taking and neurodivergent women and how that relates to leadership, within and beyond the academic and cultural industry. In the film, Andrea Bilbow (http://www.addiss.co.uk/about.htm) talks about how she risked everything to set up ADDISS, the ADHD information Service. My own talk urges us to think big and take risks, particularly during such precarious, intolerant times. I'm writing a book chapter for a book by colleagues in Birmingham City exploring borders and performativities in Arts & Humanities research, which draws on my own risk-taking — and foolhardy — behaviours. My PhD explored running (http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1420270/) as a creative discourse. I run the RUN! RUN! RUN! Biennale (http://www.kaisyngtan.com/r3fest) and manage a 70-member network (https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=RUNNING-CULTURES), which irritates the advocates of the Walking Canon and self-proclaimed intellectuals who think sweating and wearing shorts is so unbecoming. I sound, largely, civilised now, but when I talk off-script, anything could come out and I may offend — which is utterly unreserved and very un-British — which I think is also why they like me on selection panels: I say it like it is. A discussion on risk-taking and leadership and how that relates to neurodiversity is interesting also in the light of the Arts Council England's recent papers on investing in leadership in the arts (https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Transforming_Leadership_Fund_Jan2019_0.pdf) and on the salience of art and culture (https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/economic-contribution) in spite of <i>and particularly during</i> such challenging times.</p> <p>These points relate to my larger argument that I have been formulating for the past 2 years, that the arts must step up <i>today</i> (https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-humanities/2019/05/15/effecting-change-in-perspective-is-a-challenging-and-hence-critical-endeavour/). With its propensity for play and ambiguity art can and should lead discourses and shift dominant narratives. To do that we can't operate in / from / within the familiar confines of the sector and preaching to the converted. We can't just critique from the side-lines or perform outrageous, one-off, disruptive gestures. Instead, what I'm thinking is about taking risks and stepping out of our comfort zones, to engage in a deeper, slower way, setting the agenda and changing the culture. I don't mean that you need to be like Václav Havel and run a country. I'm also not talking about protest or activist art as such, though it can surely include that. Instead I'm talking about infiltrating the 'main stream', and being situated, embedded with the structures of the 'neoliberal' system (and not just namedrop it as if an all-powerful monolithic demon — as if we don't operate within it). I'm talking about engaging with, so as to unpack, grind down, unsettle the complex forces from within. I'm talking about the realm of artistic intervention and artist-in-residency as not just the cultural institution or the streets, but the real world at large. I'm talking about life as art in the Sophie Calle (https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/jul/02/sophie-calle-art-interview-what-attracts-me-is-absence-missing-death) and Teh-Ching Hsieh (https://www.tehchingsieh.com/) tradition, but I'm also talking about <i>passing</i>. (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5536256/)</p> <p>How leadership relates to neurodiversity is an interesting area to explore also because researchers (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29442378) are increasingly interested in ADHD behaviours like 'courage', 'high-level energy', 'extraordinary creativity', 'out-of- the-box thinking', 'exploration of novelty', 'craving for knowledge', 'above-average openness to experience' and 'giftedness' — some of which are associated with traits of leadership. This line of argument is best captured in popular narratives on ADHD, on how distractibility was prized when we were a hunter-gatherer society, which has also gathered scientific traction (https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959437X07000767?via%3Dihub#). The ADHD person would be alert to the threat of big cats (?) — thus saving the rest of the clan from</p>	<div>Message Me (https://www.a-n.co.uk/person/kai-syng-tan/#send-pm)</div>

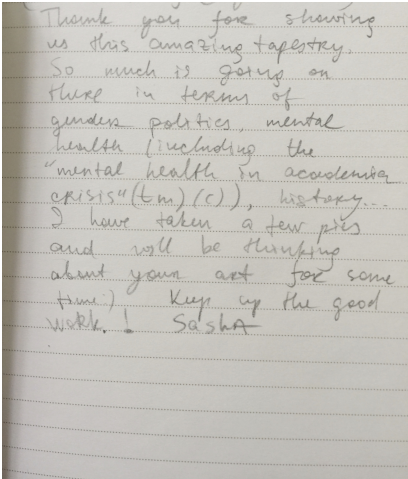
But what are we doing about this in the creative industry? We need to start from 'home' and interrogate our own industry. As many as 30% (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08856257.2012.742748?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=rejs20) of us in art and design are dyslexic. Educational psychologist David Grant even argues (http://wesatonamat.weebly.com/2017-october-24-open-studio.html) that the incidence and intensity of visualisation is greater in ADHD individuals than in neurotypicals and even dyslexics. Is this hence a hidden problem – and resource, not just in the industry, but society? Yes, someone earlier this evening talked about a mini explosion of activities around neurodiversity. But what about systemic, structural changes?

I have come up with 3 questions: which also draw on the work of Kate Marsh (https://www.themomentmagazine.com/community/kate-marsh-change-maker/), dancer and choreographer from the well-known Candoco (http://www.candoco.co.uk/?gclid=EAlaIqobChMI5dXJ46LJ4glVmpntCh3fuwDZEAYASAAEgldh_D_BwE), and whose PhD (https://curve.coventry.ac.uk/open/file/5c914aba-ec0a-4559-92b5-9f4854e18e4c/1/Combined_Redacted.pdf) explores leadership in the context of and disability and dance. Kate argues that arts and cultural sectors are built to make holding power for disabled people difficult. So, my questions are: *Why aren't there female leaders who identify as neuro-divergent in the arts and academia? Who are the gatekeepers? What needs to change?* I'm talking about long term commitments, and developing systemic, infrastructural changes that are sustainable, not short-term residencies, tokenistic box-ticking, one-offs. Not, here's £5000, go take some risks on the behalf of Norman/Norma (http://disabilityarts.online/magazine/showcase/kai-syng-tan-unreasonable-adjustments/), go be a scapegoat or shark bait (https://mind-the-gap.live/2017/05/12/come-sit-on-a-mat-with-an-artist-and-a-psychiatrist-to-have-a-chat-about-mind-wandering-gingerbread-men-shark-baits-and-the-interface-of-normalabnormal-behaviour/).

Yes, I'm talking about culture change.

I've run out of time so I'll stop here.

If you are keen to be part of a network on neurodiversity with a focus on practice (including creative practice), interdisciplinarity and intersectionality, please contact me kai@kaisyngtan.com (mailto:kai@kaisyngtan.com) .



Caption for image on top: Kai speaking at Brisk/Risks, 12/2018. Standing next to her is BSL interpreter Jacqui Beckford. Caption for this image: One of the comments received from the exhibition at Birkbeck, 05/2019 .

*See film trailer version of the film Brisk/Risks here (https://vimeo.com/336960401). * See 15-minute film with BSL here (https://vimeo.com/336958029). *See gallery and feedback of Brisk/Risks here (http://wesatonamat.weebly.com/2018-dec-4-open-mic.html). * See transcript of 2 of the open mic's presentations here (https://mind-the-gap.live/2019/06/19/risk-taking-and-adhd/).

*See images and feedback of premiere of the film at Birkbeck, University of London, on 21 May 2019 here (http://wesatonamat.weebly.com/2019-may-birkbeck.html). The film premiere was part of *Too Much/Not Enough: Neurodiversity and Cultural Production*, of the Birkbeck Arts Festival, The evening featured 2 new provocations by Kai, including one on the contested term 'neurodiversity', alongside medical humanities scholar Dr Sophie A Jones and curator Alessandra Cianetti. *Listen to the podcast of the entire evening here (https://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2019/05/too-much-not-enough-neurodiversity-and-cultural-production/) of the evening.

Explore

It begins here!

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* Find out more about #MagicCarpet here. (http://www.wesatonamat.weebly.com/)

* *The Conversation* article by Tan and Asherson: On the salience of high (https://bit.ly/2BaPUFd)quality art in mental (https://bit.ly/2BaPUFd)health (https://bit.ly/2BaPUFd)

**BMJ medical humanities* article: On thought-leadership of arts & (https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-humanities/2019/05/15/effecting-change-in-perspective-is-a-challenging-and-hence-critical-endeavour/)philosophy in (https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-humanities/2019/05/15/effecting-change-in-perspective-is-a-challenging-and-hence-critical-endeavour/)culture (https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-humanities/2019/05/15/effecting-change-in-perspective-is-a-challenging-and-hence-critical-endeavour/)change (https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-humanities/2019/05/15/effecting-change-in-perspective-is-a-challenging-and-hence-critical-endeavour/) (review of Mohammed Rashed's book on mad activism)

**Disability Arts Online* article: On neurodiversity & women (http://disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/else-neurodiversity-look-like/)

*PsychART article: On #ADHD women making #ADHD art (http://www.psychart.org.uk/index.php/blog/23-adhdwomen-making-adhdart-to-widen-the-discourse-on-mental-health)

**A-N Artists' Information* article: On mind wandering: Best Friend/Worst enemy (https://www.a-n.co.uk/blogs/mind-wandering-best-friend-or-worst-enemy/)

*KCL Culture story: On being (https://bit.ly/2KbyYCp)the first artist-in-residence, Social (https://bit.ly/2KbyYCp), Genetic & Developmental Psychiatry (https://bit.ly/2KbyYCp)Centre (https://bit.ly/2KbyYCp)

ABOUT #MAGICCARPET

The open mic and film are part of 'We Sat On A Mat and Had a Chat and Made Maps! #MagicCarpet (from 2017), which is an art-science exploration which gathers diverse and divergent bodies (and bodies of knowledge) to explore difference and (neuro)diversity, with ADHD and how it relates to mind wandering as a starting point. #MagicCarpet was a 2017 Unlimited commission funded by Arts Council England, with additional support by King's College London. Thus far, #MagicCarpet has reached more than 9000 people, including through Arts in Mind and Unlimited Festivals. Venues include Science Museum, Southbank Centre, South London Gallery, Art Workers' Guild and the Peter Scott Gallery (Lancaster). Publications include an article that was read 2000 times within 2 days of publication in *The Conversation* (10.6 million readers) and a top 2018 editorial on neurodiversity and women in *Disability Arts Online*. 100% of the feedback for an event stated that the work has challenged their understanding of how the arts and science can collide and create new insights. AHRC reviewers have described a proposal of next phase of the work as 'exciting and innovative'; 'already leading the way' and 'with an impressive track record'. #MagicCarpet was awarded a prize for 'Cultural Change' by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (2018). Dr Kai Syng Tan FRSA SFHEA was the project's lead and the first artist-in-residence at the Social, Genetic & Developmental Psychiatry Centre. An artist, consultant, curator and academic, Tan is best known for gathering diverse and divergent bodies and bodies of knowledge to engineer spaces of 'productive antagonisms' (Latham & Tan 2016) across disciplinary, geopolitical and cultural boundaries, in what she calls an interdisciplinary 'ill-disciplined' approach (Tan & Asherson 2018). Marked by an 'eclectic style and cheeky attitude' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2006), 'radical interdisciplinarity' (Alan Latham 2016) and 'positive atmosphere' (*Guardian* 2014), she is recognised as 'absolutely central' for the emerging 'Running Studies', and was Visual & Communications Director for the £4m Opening and Closing Ceremonies of 8th ASEAN Para Games (2015).



Kai Syng Tan (https://www.a-n.co.uk/person/kai-syng-tan/)

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1 Comment

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